

U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management

New Trail Segments for Picuris and Rift Valley Trails

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The Rio Grande Gorge area in northern New Mexico includes developed recreation sites, concentrated use areas, and trails within the river corridor. Among these are Wild Rivers Recreation Area, Orilla Verde Recreation Area, and the Taos Valley Overlook. Over the past 12 years, new trails have been built and public land has been acquired through purchase and easement. The Taos Valley Overlook provided an additional 2,500 acres adjacent to Orilla Verde on the rim and is connected to the river by a decommissioned county road along the Rio Pueblo and Picuris Trail to Taos Junction Bridge. A 10 mile single track trail was added to seven miles of old two track routes on the Overlook property.

1.2 Purpose and Need for Action

In all of the Taos BLM developed and concentrated use areas, trails are one of the main attractions competing only with river access and outstanding scenery. Approximately 17 miles of new trails have been developed over the past 12 years within the Rio Grande Gorge area. The purpose of this action is to develop new trail segments which would create both longer and shorter loops as well as increase trail use opportunities. The BLM needs to enhance this existing trail network to meet the growing demand for single track trail use within these recreation areas.

The Picuris/Slide Connector Trail

A new segment is needed between the Picuris Trail and The Slide Trail in the canyon. The purpose of this connector is to provide a loop from rim to canyon or vice versa while allowing users to stay on a trail rather than using NM Highway 570, recreation area access roads, or social trails that run through camp sites. Currently, hikers are using roads or social trails running between the highway shoulder across from the bridge, through the primitive sites near the Rio Pueblo, and over to the jersey barriers at the bottom of The Slide Trail. Directional signs are needed between the trails as well as a trailhead sign for The Slide Trail to direct pedestrian use of the trail and away from vehicle routes.

Rift Valley Loops

The objective of adding single track trail segments is to provide shorter loops in length and time of trip within the trail network on the Overlook in addition to the 10 mile single track loop. A large portion of hikers are following Trader's Trail out to the Rio Grande rim and then either returning on the same route or looping back on Rift Valley to the trailhead. The other return options are to follow Rift Valley toward the south and/or pick up La Gijosa Trail. Depending on the skill level of recreation users, Rift Valley Trail is up to a three hour ride for an intermediate mountain biker and up to four hours for a hiker. Most routine hikes are 3 to 7 miles. Basically, shorter loops are needed because outings are typically based on time and scheduling commitments for all users of the trails.

1.3 Land Use Plan Conformance

Providing recreation trail opportunities within the Rio Grande Gorge Recreation Area is consistent with the 2000 Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan and the 1988 Taos Resource Management Plan. The 2006 Taos Valley Overlook Plan provides for, “A non-motorized trail system with a diverse set of recreation experiences.” The Overlook Plan calls for using Best Management Practices including proper slope and drainage to reduce soil runoff. This action is also consistent with the Proposed 2012 Taos Resource Management Plan, which states one of the recreation program objectives is to “collaborate with communities to provide trail links and access to public land” as well as provide exercise close to home.

1.4 Identification of Issues

Recreation staff received routine feedback from trail users and observed the pattern of use while patrolling the recreation areas. Recreation staff observed a high level of use on Trader’s Trail and biking on Rift Valley Trail. Users of this recreation area tend to enjoy and prefer single track over two track routes. Use of vehicular routes by non-motorized users to access the Picuris and The Slide Trails do not provide a high quality opportunity for recreation.

In addition, these trail segments were presented to BLM resource specialists in a National Environmental Policy Act coordination meeting on January 17, 2012. Based on these efforts, the following issues have been determined relevant to the analysis of this action:

1.4.1 Recreation

- *How will the trail network be improved?*

1.4.2 Cultural Resources

- *Can cultural resources be avoided?*

1.4.3. Soils Soil sections from the 2006 Taos Valley Overlook Plan will be incorporated into this EA.

- *How can soils be stabilized?*

Chapter 2: Description of Alternatives

2.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action

The Picuris/Slide Connector

The connector trail would be located in the Taos Valley Overlook and Orilla Verde Recreation area within T24N, R11E, Sections 11 and 2. The connector would traverse the east slopes of the canyon above Taos Junction Bridge and over to the jersey barriers at the bottom of the old NM Highway 570 slide and avoid known cultural sites with at least a 50 foot wide buffer. This route also allows hikers to avoid the spring across from the bridge and the primitive camp sites near the Rio Grande/Rio Pueblo Confluence. The jersey barriers would be replaced with boulders, post and rail and a trailhead sign. Please refer to the attached map: *Taos Valley Overlook New Trail Segments*.

The trail would be approximately .6 miles and for hiking use only. Construction would be conducted by using a crew with hand tools. The trail bed would not exceed 12” in width. A trailhead sign with new barriers and rockwork would replace the jersey barriers at the bottom of The Slide Trail.

Rift Valley Trail Loops

A roughly .3 mile single track loop would be located in the Taos Valley Overlook which would connect Trader's Trail with Rift Valley Trail. Another one mile loop would be located running roughly Northeast and Southwest between La Gijosa Trail. The most southern segment of the Rift Valley Trail would connect both Klauer and Rift Valley Trails. These single track segments would be between 12" and 18" in width.

One of the primary design and location objectives would be to keep water off the trail by using a combination of; cross sloping (up to 2.5 percent), water bars, rolling dips, and slight, shallow cross trenching. All trail segments would be for non-motorized recreation. The aim would be to maintain an 8-10 percent running slope when possible. Some stone or wood steps may be used in short sections where the slope exceeds 15 percent. The segments are routed around large trees, so no trees over 5 feet tall would be removed. It is anticipated that some light pruning of existing trees would be required. Wooden directional signs would be placed at intersections along the new segments. Refer to the attached map.

2.2 Alternative B: No Action

Under the No Action alternative, no new segments would be constructed on these trails at this time.

Chapter 3: Affected Environment

3.1 Recreation

In 2011, the Rio Grande Gorge area received 452, 897 visits, almost 82 percent of the total visits estimated for the BLM Taos Field Office. There are almost 65 miles of non-motorized trail within the recreation area and trail use is a significant portion of visitor use. About 38% of respondents in a 2009 survey reported participating in hiking, while 2% said they rode horses, and 3% said they mountain biked. There were 12,557 visits on Taos Valley Overlook where virtually all activity stems from trail use.

The Rift Valley Trail is accessed primarily from NM Highway 68 about 1.6 miles south of Stakeout Drive. Many hikers walk out to the rim and back to the trailhead on the same route for about an hour and a half trip.

The Slide Trail can be accessed from the Rio Pueblo de Taos and Rio Grande confluence in Orilla Verde or from County Road 110 on the rim. A significant number of users start at the top. Picuris Trail is accessed most often from the trailhead across from Taos Junction Bridge. To hike both trails for a longer trip, users must access vehicle roads as well as social trails that run through campsites.

3.2 Cultural Resources

The Taos Valley Overlook and Orilla Verde encompass areas that are known to contain significant cultural resources associated with prehistoric and historic use of the region. Included in these resources are the remains of habitation sites, trails, hunting and gathering camps, petroglyphs, and mining facilities.

3.3 Soils

Soils within the gorge are described as Orthents-Rock outcrops association, which consist of steep soil and rock outcrops typical of canyons along the Rio Grande. Orthents are deep, well-drained soils on canyon slopes, found in material that is derived from old alluvium of the Santa Fe Formation. The surface layer is gravelly or cobbled loam; the underlying material is gravelly loam or gravelly clay loam. Rock outcrops characteristic of this soil association consist of nearly vertical escarpments of basalt that formed a protective cap over the alluvial sediment. The erosion and slumping hazards, steepness of slope, and stoniness restrict human use of this association. The Rio Grande riparian zone is characterized by alluvial material deposited during flood events. Alluvial soils include numerous size classes of material from silt to boulder and is subject to flooding and erosion annually.

The upland soils are of the Sedillo-Silva association, more strongly sloping than gentle within the planning area. The Silva is a clay loam and rated as “slight” or generally favorable with minor and easily overcome limitations, for paths and trails. The Sedillo is gravelly clay loam and rated as “moderate” (due to slope) for paths and trails. When wet, where the soils are high in clay content, it may be undesirable for foot, horse, or bicycle traffic, and excessive soil damage could occur.

Chapter 4: Environmental Effects

4.1 Direct and Indirect Effects

4.1.1 Alternative A: Proposed Action

4.1.1.1 Recreation

Positive effects to recreation users will result from the Proposed Action. A longer trail loop within Orilla Verde and Taos Valley Overlook of up to 13 miles would be created by linking Rift Valley, Picuris, and The Slide Trails. Making connections from Rift Valley to Trader’s Trail and La Gijosa and Klauer to Rift Valley creates an additional short loop for routine, time sensitive trips. There would be an overall increase in trail opportunities and type of trips in the Rio Grande Gorge area. A comprehensive trail network will continue to emerge and be enhanced.

Connecting Picuris and The Slide together directly with a trail will minimize non motorized use of vehicle routes and travel through camp sites.

4.1.1.2 Cultural Resources

Portions of the proposed trail routes fall within areas where previous archaeological investigations have demonstrated a high propensity for significant cultural resources to be present. In particular, the proposed route of the Picuris/Slide Connector Trail traverses an area where the probability of encountering significant cultural resources is particularly high. The areas encompassed by the Rift Valley/Trader’s Trail/Connector and the Rift Valley/Klauer Trail Connector is less likely to contain significant cultural resources.

Cultural resources surveys were conducted on all three proposed trail routes. No significant cultural resources were encountered on the proposed route of the Rift Valley/Trader's Trail Connector or the Rift Valley/Klauer Trail Connector. As expected, significant cultural resources were encountered along the proposed route of the Picuris/Slide Connector Trail. Complete avoidance is recommended by rerouting the applicable segments of the proposed trail to provide, at a minimum, a 50 foot wide protective buffer around any significant cultural resources in the area.

Avoiding significant cultural resources with a 50 foot buffer will result in no impacts to cultural resources from the construction, maintenance, or use of any of the proposed trails.

4.1.1.2 Soils

Site visits by staff identified new disturbance for trails and existing road conditions as likely impacts of concern for soils. Direct impacts include increased water runoff resulting in increased soil erosion adjacent to trails and in arroyos. Although soils are identified as having a slight to moderate erosion hazard, severe erosion has been observed throughout the planning area.

To minimize the potential impact of site development and use, the following mitigation is proposed:

- ◆ Close and rehabilitate existing roads with highest erosion indicators.
- ◆ Quantify road rehabilitation area and set limits on new trail development as a percentage of land surface restored.
- ◆ Develop trails using Best Management Practices including proper drainage and slope to reduce runoff hazard.
- ◆ Existing roads to be maintained for trails should be reduced in width by revegetating where appropriate.
- ◆ Arroyo crossings need to be designed to limit potential incision through ingress/egress layout, installation of small structures in channel, or both.
- ◆ Seasonal closure of trails may be required. Trail monitoring and maintenance records should identify problem areas due to seasonal conditions.
- ◆ Seeding with native grasses and forbs adjacent to designated trails.

4.1.2 Alternative B: No Action

4.1.2.1 Recreation

No new trail opportunities for short or long loops would be created. This also limits the opportunity for new single track trail. No separation of motorized and non motorized travel through recreation access roads and campsites would be created. This would leave a less than desirable situation for users in which they would hike or bike vehicle access roads and walk through campsites to connect with either Picuris or The Slide Trail.

4.1.2.2 Cultural Resources

No cultural resources will be affected by the No Action alternative.

4.1.2.3 Soils

The same impacts and mitigation would apply to the No Action as Alternative A regarding rehabilitation of existing roads and reduction of road width.

4.2 Cumulative Effects Analysis

4.2.1 Cumulative Actions

4.2.1.1 Past and Present Actions

New trails have been incorporated into Wild Rivers and Orilla Verde over the past 12 years. The trails are Las Vistas de Questa, The Slide (converted road/trail on a public right-of-way), Rift Valley, and Picuris Trails. Two track routes were designated for non motorized use on the Overlook.

4.2.1.2 Reasonably Foreseeable Actions

The BLM will pursue acquisition of land from a willing seller at the top of the Rio Pueblo de Taos rim adjacent to County Road 110 which would provide additional public access to the Overlook. Subsequent to acquisition, BLM would establish a formal trailhead with interpretive exhibits and an interpretive trail. There is the potential for adding more trail connections or loops on Taos Valley Overlook.

4.2.2 Cumulative Effects

4.2.2.1 Recreation

There is a demonstrated demand for public access at the end of County Road 110. Acquisition would result in positive effects of increased management. BLM would be able to control unauthorized vehicle use and trash dumping. A trailhead in this location would tie together the trail networks of Orilla Verde and Taos Valley Overlook as well as enhance opportunities to stage competitive events or other permitted recreation activities. Potential Special Recreation Use permit applicants have approached BLM regarding hosting competitive and endurance events in this area.

The addition of a formal trailhead at the end of County Road 110 would probably not create much more recreation use than what already occurs. However, there may be a slight increase in use or a change in the type of user due to an increase in management presence. At a certain point, adding more trail segments and loops could alter the experience of the Overlook by increasing group encounters and/or the sights and sounds of human activity. The management prescription for the recreation setting on the Overlook is Middle Country. Further defined social and physical setting prescriptions are: 29 encounters per day and a ½ mile from or within sight of improved roads.

4.2.2.2 Cultural Resources

A cultural resource inventory would be conducted on any new potential future recreation projects in the area. Any new disturbance from potential future recreation facilities would need to avoid known sites by at least 50 feet.

4.2.2.3 Soils

Improvements proposed for the Taos Overlook may result in increased use. Increased use of dirt trails and roads will increase compaction and possibly expand area of disturbed ground if users. These impacts can result in higher runoff and erosion. Mitigation proposed should alleviate potential problems.

Chapter 5: Consultation and Coordination

5.1 Summary of Consultation and Coordination

A variety of non motorized recreation users were consulted during routine patrols in the recreation areas.

5.2 Summary of Public Participation

The EA was released to the public for review and comment between April 26 and May 26, 2012.

5.2.1 Public Comments Analysis

Identify and respond to all substantive comments on the EA submitted during the public review and comment period. Provide the names of persons or parties who submitted comments. Present the comment or a summary of the comment and indicate how the comment was considered. A response to a comment could be a change to the EA, in which case specify where the change is made in the document, or a response could be an explanation as to why the comment did not render a change to the document.

5.3 List of Preparers

Tami Torres	Outdoor Recreation Planner
Merrill Dicks	Archaeologist
Greg Gustina	Fish Biologist

Chapter 6: References

2011	USDI BLM Draft Taos Resource Management Plan Revision
2009	USDI BLM National Visitor Use Monitoring Results. Pilot Test. October.
2006	USDI BLM Taos Valley Overlook Project Plan.
2000	USDI BLM Rio Grande Corridor Final Plan
1984	USDI BLM Trails. BLM Handbook. 9114-1